

Book Review

THE GREAT CHURCH TOWERS OF ENGLAND, CHIEFLY OF THE PERPENDICULAR PERIOD : a photographic study of all the principal towers, with critical notes, record of architectural details, and exposition of the principles of tower design. By Frank J. Allen, M.A., M.D.CANTAB., Cambridge, at the University Press, 1932.

This admirable book, produced with the artistic skill in type and illustration which the Cambridge University Press has brought to so high a pitch, is of special interest to members of our Society. The author is a Somerset man who for many years past has been recognised as a leading authority upon the architecture of the county ; and the chief part of his work is occupied by the mature results of a long examination of the church towers of Somerset. The mutual relation of these magnificent structures is a problem which has tempted previous students into speculative attempts to classify them in groups dominated by certain prominent features of design. Such attempts are greatly complicated by the absence of documentary evidence, by the traditional attribution of dates which have no authoritative foundation, and by the widely differing temperaments of individual observers. It may be too much to say that Dr. Allen's classification is the final settlement of a difficult question ; but no one has hitherto devoted such prolonged and minute attention to the subject, or has taken into account combinations of features which, without long concentration and detailed comparison, may easily elude even the most carefully trained eye.

In the ascription to the tower of Shepton Mallet of the leading influence in Somerset tower-design, Dr. Allen may be acquitted of any prejudice fostered by local patriotism. His reasons for attributing to this tower, or to a prototype from which it was developed, the ultimate origin of three separate groups, West Mendip, Quantock and East Mendip, rest upon sound premises. These groups apparently come into being at different periods during the late years of the fourteenth and the whole of the fifteenth century, and exhibit characteristics worked out in independence of each other ; but the influence of the primary model of the West Mendip towers upon the groups, of which the towers of Bishops Lydeard and Bruton seem to be the formative patterns, is something more than a happy con-

jecture. Outside these principal groups there are others for which no common origin is discoverable. The Wells group stands by itself, exercising considerable influence in detail upon certain members of the rest. The distinction of North and South Somerset groups and a group of which the tower of Brislington is the typical example, depends upon communities of features of which all that can be said is that they are there. Apart from these there are a large number of towers, including those of Chewton Mendip, St. John's at Glastonbury and Ilminster, which are shown by careful examination to fall into none of the local classes.

The principal towers of other English counties are profusely illustrated with detailed comment. Dr. Allen shows that the tower-builders of Somerset exercised little influence upon those of neighbouring districts. The towers of Dorset indeed are closely allied to their work, and it is natural that the splendid tower of Chittlehampton, in a Devonshire border-parish, should borrow its design from its Somerset neighbours. On the other hand, the characteristic Devonian design invaded South Somerset, and the fine towers of Gloucestershire, a strikingly individual group, affected several buildings at the Bristol end of the county. Somerset influence, however, may be traced much further afield. The remarkable example at Probus in Cornwall unquestionably is a copy of the tower at North Petherton; and at St. Neots in Huntingdonshire and Tichmarsh in Northamptonshire the builders, though probably local men, were almost certainly acquainted with contemporary work in Somerset. Great Ponton in South Lincolnshire is a less probable instance of the connexion between Somerset and the east Midlands, and its window-tracery is of a strongly local type; but that there was such a connexion seems clear, not only from the evidence of St. Neots and Tichmarsh, but from the occurrence of distinctively Midland tracery in the windows of the Quantock towers.

We are not so sure of the alliance between the towers of Somerset and those of Yorkshire, and we think that Dr. Allen is probably too confident of the effect which Walter Skirlaw, bishop of Bath and Wells (1386-88), may have had upon the tower-design of his native county. Bishops too often have been made responsible for architectural influence, and Skirlaw was eminently a political bishop, promoted to the episcopate and subsequently translated to Durham for his services to a party, and his short tenure of the see of Bath and Wells is not likely, at a period of political stress, to have had much impression upon his artistic sense. All we can say is that, being a Yorkshireman who had obtained his early preferments in that county, he is more likely to have introduced Yorkshire masons into Somerset than to have taken Somerset masons into Yorkshire upon his return to the north. Into the details of his connexion with the tower of Howden, where the manor-house of the bishops of Durham bears his shield of arms, we need not enter; but such

evidence as exists for the building of the church at South Skirlaugh indicates a later date for it than his lifetime.

The attribution of tower-design to guilds of masons is perhaps too readily accepted by Dr. Allen. For the existence of such travelling guilds there is no strong evidence, and, although the same masons might no doubt often be found seeking work in company, there is no proof that they formed any settled organisation or did more than observe the rules laid down for their conduct by the officials of the fabrics at which they worked. The general facts to be gathered from building account-rolls and other documents are that the master-mason who was responsible for the design picked his men in consultation with the keepers of the fabric, and, as he sometimes had other buildings to look after, placed their general superintendence in the hands of a deputy chosen from their number and paid them periodical visits. We would suggest, as regards Somerset, that, while the local features which distinguish the various groups of towers point to the employment of masons trained in local methods of treatment, and left to work out the suggestions of the master-mason on local lines, the same artist may well have produced the designs of towers which belong to more than one group. The eclectic character of certain towers makes this highly probable. Architects develop individual styles, but they are not always engaged in copying themselves or confining themselves to a single model.

There are omissions from Dr. Allen's survey, but they are not of first-rate importance, and he does not profess to give a complete account of towers outside Somerset. As it is, the rest of England is richly represented. The period covered is limited to the end of the middle ages, when towers were planned without reference to their capacity for carrying spires, and the towers of West Walton in the Norfolk marshland, Elm in Cambridgeshire and Whissendine in Rutland are, so far as we have noticed, the only buildings entirely of an earlier date which are selected for description. The short introductory section is illustrated by some photographs of earlier towers. The prevalence of the flat-topped and pinnacled tower in fifteenth-century England was probably helped on by the contemporary flattening of the pitch of church roofs and the building of clerestories, with which the tower was in better harmony than the spired steeple. No more striking examples of the fertility and variety of building design characteristic of the once despised 'Perpendicular' era of architecture can be found than its church-towers, ranging from the beautiful creations which are the glory of Somerset, triumphs of a romantic phase of art which had its birth in the West of England, to the plain and somewhat prosaic productions of the home counties. The towers of Bruton and Huish Episcopi, however, are crowning instances of the art which evolved elsewhere such designs as the towers of Gloucester, with its far-reaching influence, Canterbury, Gresford, Wrexham and Boston; and there are many far less

ambitious designs whose quiet grace and dignity bears witness to the versatile accomplishment of the fifteenth-century artist. The riches of the period in this department have never been exhibited so fully before or with such systematic treatment, and the modern architect, as well as the antiquary and ecclesiologist, will profit by the study of a volume in which a scientific antiquary who is also an excellent photographer has so well assembled the fruits of his researches.

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